

*A speedy Repentance the most effectual Means
to avert Gods Judgments.*

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A
S E R M O N

Preached at the
PARISH CHURCH of St. Anne Westminster,
February 6, 1756;

Being the Day appointed for a
GENERAL FAST and HUMILIATION,
On Account of the late
Dreadful and Extensive EARTHQUAKES,

AND FOR
Imploring a Blessing from Almighty God upon his Majestys
Counfils, Fleets and Armies.

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Fellow of the Royal Society, Archdeacon of Bath, Rector of St.
Annes Westminster, and Vicar of *East-Greenwich in Kent*.

L O N D O N :
Printed for CHARLES BATHURST opposite St. Dunstons
Church, Fleet-street.

MDCCLVI.

SERMON



THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Printed by J. G. & J. S. Nichols, 10, St. Martin's Lane, London, W.

LONDON

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to render it more difficult to lay hold upon the scales of
divine justice, to weigh the crimes of their fellow-
creatures in a balance, and to direct the thunderbolts of
heaven according to their capricious fancies : yet may

*the conduct of our fellow-creatures be the subject of our
reflection, when in the mirror of the world we see
in general (without which there had been no possi-
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REVELATIONS ii. 5.

*Remember from whence thou art fallen, and re-
pent, and do the first works ; or else I will
come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy
candlestick out of its place, except thou repent.*

VERY wisely, as well as affectionately, has
the father of his people taken occasion from
the late dreadful calamity, which laid waste
the once flourishing metropolis of *Portugal*,
and visited so many other countries with its terrors,
earnestly to exhort and command his own subjects to
humble themselves before almighty God for their ma-
nifold sins and wickednesses ; in the most devout and
solemn manner to offer up their petitions to the divine
Majesty for the continuance of his forbearance and pro-
tection ; and to implore his blessing upon our counsils,
fleets and armies.

For tho' it ill becomes weak, ignorant, and sinful
mortals curiously to pry into the hidden ways of pro-

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vidence,

vidence, authoritatively to lay hold upon the scales of divine justice, to weigh the crimes of their fellow-creatures in a balance, and to direct the thunderbolts of heaven according to their capricious fancies: yet may the distresses of our suffering brethren be very usefully held out to us as mirrors, wherein the malignity of sin in general (without which there had been no punishment) may be clearly discerned. The distresses of our suffering brethren point out to us, in the most lively and affecting manner, the instability of human life, the uncertainty of its best enjoyments, the vanity of trusting in riches, and honours, and power, the impotence of pride, and the variety of woe, under which both we and our country are every moment liable to be overwhelmed.

When we see, therefore, (as in the sad occasion of the present solemnity) the arm of the Almighty stretched out in wrath, and his judgments falling heavy upon particular persons, bodies of men, or nations—Instead of enhancing, by our rash censures and unjustifiable reproaches, the miseries of the unhappy sufferers; instead of erecting ourselves into a cruel, arbitrary, and impious inquisition into their lives, opinions, and manners; let us behold their miseries with the tenderest eye of pity, consolation, and beneficence, and endeavour to sanctify their sorrow to our spiritual advantage—Instead of suffering our own wonderful escape (in defiance of the divine admonitions) to harden our callous hearts yet more and more in our wickedness; let us, with souls full of the most grateful thankfulness, adore the goodness of that Being, who, in the midst of punishment,

ment, remembred mercy, and permitted not the destroying angel to come nigh our dwellings to hurt us. The complicated woes of our impoverished, distressed, and ruined ally, have a natural tendency to rouse us from that lethargy of carelessness, indolence and indifference with regard to God and his religion, which a state of ease, plenty and security is too commonly attended with — let them have their full weight upon our awakened consciences; let them persuade us that the Lord alone, he is to be revered, to be loved, to be confided in, and obeyed; let them effectually convince us, that the fate of nations is in his hands, either to enlarge, or to streighten them, either to bring them low, or to lift them up, as their general conduct shall be more or less conformable to his eternal laws of righteousness.

Remember, therefore, from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

I doubt not but you have already anticipated the application, which I am about to make of these words to the declining state of morality and religion in these kingdoms, and to the severe judgments which we have too much reason to apprehend, in consequence of falling from our first works, unless we avert the divine anger by a speedy repentance. For tho' the denunciation in my text was originally directed to the church of *Ephesus*; yet has it ever been considered as a standing warning from our Lord himself to all kingdoms and societies of christians, that they fall not from grace; that they abuse not the glorious light of the gospel de-

livered to them by the hands of the Evangelists and Apostles ; lest God in his displeasure should visit them with his sore judgments, should remove their candlestick out of his place, and leave them to darkness and destruction.

In the first place then, that these kingdoms are indeed fallen from the first works of christian piety, benevolence and purity, and that the genuine power of godliness is, in a great measure, lost amongst us, is a truth which will be as little disputed, as that a false notion of honour, and a vain-glorious thirst after the approbation and praise of the multitude have usurped the sacred place of religion, are become the prevailing passion of the age, and have produced an almost general depravity of faith, and corruption of manners.

For tho' the esteem of the few, the wise and the virtuous, is a laudable pursuit, and one of the most fruitful sources of useful and commendable actions ; yet to form our characters upon, and to direct our conduct by, the opinion of the injudicious vulgar, is the greatest vanity, and cannot be sufficiently condemned. If it be not the worst of evils in itself, it is, perhaps, the worst in its effects ; it is ever teeming with folly and mischief, and attended with an endless train of vice and extravagancies. For not to dwell upon the inconceivable miseries which this principle has occasioned, by firing the ambition of pretended heroes to spread the desolations of war through the world ; we will confine our review to the wickedness, and the wretchedness which it is every day producing in common life. Is it not from *loving the admiration of men more than the praise of God,* that

that so much pains are taken to make an appearance, and to outshine one another in costly apparel, splendid equipages, stately buildings, gaudy furniture, sumptuous entertainments, and a train of idle and useless attendants? And as this ostentatious manner of life usually surpasses our incomes, and draws us into all the incumbrance of debts, mortgages, and abject dependencies; so the difficulties and perplexities attendant upon so distressful a situation are the most natural introduction to lying, fraud, and oppression; to cheating in our dealings, and treachery in our friendships; to personal underminings, and party-oppositions; to gaming, duelling, and self-murder.

Thus are our fortunes devoured by our vanity, and virtue falls a sacrifice to necessity. Thus is benevolence, true generosity, and the love of God extinguished in our hearts, and succeeded by a spirit of low emulation, of envy and malice towards those who make a greater figure than ourselves, together with such a violent disposition to despise, ridicule, injure, slander, backbite, and murmur, as is utterly inconsistent with the duty of neighbours, subjects, or christians.

The same false and fantastic ambition of living at other peoples admiration and applause, rather than for the substantial concerns of our souls, our families, or our country, has melted us down into an universal effeminacy, and introduced a general affectation of niceness and delicacy, of being above business, industry, and economy, and of being good for nothing, but to shine in a polite assembly, to dress with taste, and to

understand the ceremonial of fashionable decorum---as if a shewy and glittering outside were an argument of a finer clay and composition than the rest of mankind, and those ornaments of nobility, which are so eagerly aimed at, were a dispensation from the labours of life, and the service of our generation. Nor will the rising age afford us a more agreeable prospect, if we consider the fashionable ways of education; if we reflect upon the indulgence of parents, the remissness of tutors, and the ill examples of each; if we may form our judgments by the ideas of vanity, with which tender minds are seasoned from their infancy, the pernicious notions and maxims, with which they are tainted in their youth, together with the lewd, prophane, and impious discourses, which they constantly hear, as they advance to manhood.

For infidelity, also, is the sure offspring of pride, and self-conceit. It is God's own declaration, that *the meek he will guide in judgment*, and, that *he will give grace to the lowly*. But *the proud he resisteth, or beboldeth afar off*, that is, he rejects them from his presence, and leaves them, like abandoned reprobates, to themselves, and their own devices. For such scorners are intractable, and hate instruction, their haughty souls are above counsil or advice, and so firmly attached to the vain pomps and pleasures of the world, that the love of the Father cannot be in them. For no man can serve two masters; and when once we have suffered our affections to be pre-ingaged to the possessions, honours, or ornaments of this present earthly state, we can have no taste nor relish for the remote expectations of spiritual joys,

joys, or for the doctrines of humility, self-denial, and mortification, which prepare us for them.

As this was, at first, amongst the chief obstacles to the reception of the gospel, so will it be an everlasting occasion of apostacy from it. *Not many rich men, not many mighty, not many noble are called.*—And the reason is obvious—They are enlisted before-hand into a contrary service. They are devoted to the pursuits of luxury and ambition, and all their affections so totally engrossed by the court made, and incense offered to wealth and grandeur, to ostentation and the admiration of the multitude, that the preachers of the cross are looked upon as *babblers, and setters forth of strange doctrine.*—A strange doctrine, indeed, to recommend the ornament of a meek, quiet, and devout spirit to the eager frequenters of balls and assemblies! and to tell the pompous Agrippas and Bernices of the age in the name of Christ, that the poor Lazars lying at their gates, or cleansing their streets, are their relations and brethren, made of the same dust, bought with the same price, and to appear with them at the same bar, where there is no respect of persons.

A man must expect to be treated with contempt by moral and metaphysical scepticks, puffed up with the conceit of their own superior knowledge, when he offers to inform them, that it is not *the wisdom of this world which God has chosen*; and that, *in professing themselves to be wise above what is written*, they discover only their own folly. It is not to be wondered, that the preachers of the gospel are looked upon either as enthusiasts

faits or impostors, when they attempt to persuade a haughty Sadducee or Freethinker, *that for all these things God will bring him to judgment*; that he is to reject the *vain Philosophy*, and plausible reasonings with which carnal minds delight to be entertained; and that he is meekly to receive the *sincere milk of the word*, as the most assured means, by which he can grow up to the *manhood of faith and virtue*.

Pride and irreligion generally go hand in hand; and scarcely is it possible, *that they should sincerely believe, who receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour which cometh of God only*. The doctrines of humility, lowliness of spirit, and self-denial, are utterly irreconcilable to the vain-glorious notions of the contemptuous scorner. And hence it comes to pass that the gospel of Christ is blasphemed as an improbable scheme of superstition, its ministers abused as crafty hypocrites, and the sacred places appointed for its publication almost totally neglected and forsaken. As if men were interested *in doing despite to the grace of God*, there seems to be a sort of contrivance amongst them, an affectation as it were, of prophaning the day particularly set apart for his worship. Those whose superior birth, or riches, or station in the world give them, as they would fain flatter themselves, an exemption from strictly attending to the laws either of their God, or their country, appear fond of publicly insulting it, by making choice of it as the most proper time for travelling, feasting, or gaming. Others, encouraged by the impious example, reserve it for the season of inspecting their affairs, reckoning with their dealers, or balancing their accounts. The very lowest of the people rejoice to imi-

imitate the general prophanation, by buying and selling, by rioting and drunkennels, by chattering and wantonness; and by all these ways they are drawing out the eyes of the Lord.

Thus have we dared to provoke the Holy One of Israel to anger, and (as the prophet expresses it) are gone away backward. — This carnal politeness is the fruitful parent of spiritual barbarism, and this shameful neglect of the Lord's Day brings forth an universal infidelity, ignorance, and indifference with regard to God and his religion. Whilst some are like the deaf adder, that stoppeth her ears; and others, like fools, absent themselves from, or mock at, instruction, a general insensibility of God's severity as well as his goodness lays hold on their very souls; so that they follow the world and the flesh without remorse or compunction, and are so intoxicated with vain appearances, as even to glory in their shame. Is such defection and backsliding to be borne with in a people enlightened by the Sun of Righteousness? Shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord, and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this? Can either ancient or modern records furnish us with the history of a country, which has not fallen the speedy victim of its impiety, where the establish'd worship has been generally contemned and deserted? But this reflection brings me,

Secondly, To consider the judgments, which we have reason to apprehend for thus falling from our first love, and departing from our first works: — I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

It is the usual manner of divine Providence to chastise men with rods of their own gathering; to punish in kind; to put out the eyes that will not see; to stop the ears that will not hear; and to harden the hearts that will not understand. As this was his method of dealing with Pharaoh, with the wicked Ahab, and with the people of Jerusalem; of the like nature is his ministration, in this place, to the church of Ephesus. If they bury their talents, they shall be taken from them; if they despise the authority of the gospel and its precepts, it shall be removed out of their sight; if they will not see the things which belong unto their peace, they shall be left to wander and perish in the darkness of their evil ways.

And what apology can this kingdom make for itself, why the same sentence should not be pronounced against it? Was ever a people exalted to a more advantageous prospect of the truth, or blessed with more clear and shining lights to discover its powers, to admire its beauties, and to pursue its divine guidance.

Have we not a religion the most pure and reasonable which can be conceived, and whose whole tendency is to advance our intellectual powers to their best and truest happiness? Have we not the bible in its primitive integrity, in our own hands, and in our native language? And was there ever an age when it was more faithfully expounded, its evidence more clearly understood, or its precepts more plainly set forth, and more eloquently recommended? Can any practicable form of government be imagined more perfect than our civil constitution,

stitution, founded upon the natural liberties of mankind, and administered by established laws, in which we have an unalienable right?

Let us consider, moreover, in how wonderful manner these various mercies have been preserved, augmented, and continued to us; and how many times the Lord himself has appeared on our side, when we were just upon the brink of being swallowed up quick! To his immediate interposition we owe the Revolution, the establishment of the Protestant succession, the extinction of the late unnatural rebellion, and (may I not add?) the last general peace at Aix la Chapelle? But can we reasonably expect, that his spirit will always strive with our ingratitude? Can we flatter ourselves, that he will still have patience to gather us like chickens under his wings, against our stubborn wills and inclinations? or can we hope to escape with impunity, whilst we persist to neglect so great salvation? How justly may the Almighty expostulate with these nations, as he formerly did with the obstinate and sinful Jews? *And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore when I looked, that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now, go to, I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard; I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down. And I will lay it waste, it shall not be pruned nor digged, but there shall come up briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds, that they rain no rain upon it. For*

the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression for righteousness, but behold a cry.

For personal offences, we are taught that there will be a personal judgment, when the *tares shall be separated from the good corn, and the goats divided from the sheep*; but national iniquities require a national visitation; and seem insolently to challenge the justice of Heaven for famine, pestilence, earthquakes or civil wars; for showers of fire and brimstone, or for universal deluges.

There is no office so uncomfortable, none so unthankful, none so difficult, as to convince a dissolute and profligate generation of the evil of their ways, or of the destruction, which is preparing for them. But I dare not handle the word of the Lord deceitfully, nor like the false prophets, flatter your indolence by crying *peace, peace, whilst destruction is at our gates.*

The day, the manner, or the instruments of God's justice, cannot possibly be known or prescribed by us. Fire and water, wind and storm, all nature stands ready to fulfil the omnipotent nod.

The cities of our nearest and most valuable ally has he already overwhelmed under all the complicated horrors of fire and earthquake; the neighbouring nations he has roused from their security with inundations, and lesser tremblings of their land, whilst universal warning has been given to all, that as all are sinners,
unless

unless they repent, they shall all likewise perish. For neither the dictates of right reason, nor the declarations of holy writ will warrant us to conclude, that the wretched Portuguese, who have fallen the first victims of divine Providence, were sinners more than the rest of mankind, or more than we ourselves are. For let us seriously ask ourselves upon the present solemn occasion—Were they wilful transgressors of Gods laws, by offending against their better knowledge in innumerable instances? So are we. Were they a dissipated people, profane, indolent, vicious, and *lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God?* So are we. Were they unthankful and unprofitable under the means of grace, and the many favours which had been vouchsafed to them from Heaven? Are not we still more ungrateful to the *father of mercies and giver of all good gifts*, as we justly boast of higher favours, and greater privileges than any other nation under heaven? Were their opinions upon many of the most important doctrines of our common religion false and absurd, and their practise in consequence of them, impious, cruel and inhuman? Have we taken due care to form to ourselves just and true notions of the Deity, to understand the genuine powers of Christianity, and to direct our lives agreeably to what we know and profess to believe? Is there that consistency, that harmony between our faith and our moral conduct, which both reason and religion so justly demand of us? Though therefore we have hitherto most wonderfully escaped *the arrow that walketh in darkness, and the pestilence that wasteth at noon day*, yet we know not how soon the arm of the Almighty may be stretched out against us, for past impunity is no security against future punishment.

But

But however difficult it may be, and perhaps, impossible, for us precisely to determine with which of his *four fore judgments* the Almighty will visit these sinful kingdoms; whether he will command the famine, the pestilence, the earthquake, or the sword, to lay waste and consume our land; yet are the signs of the times, at this critical conjuncture, too visible to be entirely slighted by us. For *a great nation, strong and without number, are coming against us*; and I know not what grounds we can reasonably depend upon of escape or deliverance.—If we put our trust in the length of our sword, or the number of our forces, it is plain that we must either fall or fly before them. If we consider our merits, and the affronts which we are continually offering to the God of battles, we have very small hopes, that he will dwell in our tents, or go forth with our fleets and armies. Our consciences will reproach us that our destruction is from the Lord; and that how wicked soever our enemies may be, yet they are in his hand as plagues and scourges, and made use of by him, like wind and storm, to obey his command.

The most aggravating circumstance of our situation is, that should our enemy be permitted to execute their long-projected schemes of universal influence and dominion, they will come not barely to correct, but entirely to subdue us, that *before them a fire will devour, and behind them a flame burn*; and that *our native country, which is as a garden of Eden, will become a desolation*—Then shall the inhabitants of the land mourn, and all faces shall gather blackness. Then shall we eat of the fruit of our own works, and reap the crop which we have been so wantonly

willfully sowing. The vines shall be cut off from the drunkards; the treasures from the rapacious gamester, who worships no other deity but fortune; the costly dishes from the glutton and epicure, and our rich array be succeeded by nakedness, baldness and deformity. Our envied liberty, which we have used for a cloke of maliciousness, will be turned into slavery, and all the talents which we have either buried or misapplied, withdrawn from our hands. Above all, our religion, so dear to our forefathers, will be abolished, or persecuted. Our churches shut up or prophaned with idolatry; our bibles taken from us, and hid, as under a bushel, in an unknown tongue, and our candlestick entirely removed out of his place, except we repent.

For repentance is the great and only remedy, which we can effectually make use of, to prevent all these evils from coming upon us.

Repentance is the remedy prescribed in my text; prescribed by *John the Baptist*, and the great physician of souls, in the gospels; by *Moses* and the Prophets, and by all the Holy Scriptures of both the Testaments.

By repentance we are to understand a thorough reformation of faith and manners; a steadfast submission and strict attention to the oracles of God, rather than to the vain opinions, absurd customs, and fashionable maxims of the world, with an unalterable resolution to walk by the divine commands. This is a regimen which will dry up the very springs of that flood of miseries which threatens

threatens to overwhelm us, and will remove the causes both of our own infirmity, and of the Almighty's displeasure. High time, therefore, is it, that in the midst of so many and great dangers, we diligently enter into this salutary course, and suffer no excuses of the world or the flesh to delay it for a moment. Follow not the multitude to do evil; nor be afraid, thro' a false modesty, to be singularly good, always remembering, that numbers will neither justify, defend, nor comfort you in the day of real tribulation.

Let no man be discouraged in declaring openly for virtue and religion, from a foolish suggestion, that he is but *one*; and that his single addition can make but very little difference, where such vast numbers are concerned. For this way of computation is deceitful, pernicious, and unknown to the best and wisest men.

The prophet *Elijah* complains, indeed, *that he was left alone*; but that reflection, however, did not deter him from rebuking wickedness in high places, or from adhering to the Lord with zeal and constancy. Tho' the preachings of *Noah* were not able to prevail upon the old world to turn it unto righteousness; yet he preached on whilst the ark was preparing, and had, at least, the consolation of saving himself, and his whole family, from perishing by water. *St. Paul* was in a terrible storm and shipwreck, surrounded by the worst of company; yet were the whole crew of sailors, soldiers and criminals, given in safety to his single prayers and piety. The history of *Abraham's* stipulation for *Sodom* will convince us, that there wanted but a few units

units to the ransom of that whole region; and, to make this our own case, as all the millions these kingdoms can reckon, must consist but of so many *ones*, who knows how few of these *ones* may be wanting, in the scale of Gods mercy, to outweigh his vengeance?

Let no man be offended, that I have taken the liberty (after the stile of the prophets) to lay the accusation in general terms, and to impute the crimes of the many, or of the majority, to the whole society! For after all that may be said, I trust there are still seven, or rather seventy-times seven thousand good christians left in our *Israel*, who have not yet bowed the knee to *Baal*. And what is there that might not be hoped for from their pious endeavours, if all such, in their several stations, would zealously exert themselves to fill up the precious inventory of the righteous, and to multiply voices in the powerful intercession to the throne of grace?

Of as small importance as each single person may look upon himself to be in the community; yet who is there so mean, or of so poor an interest, but that he has some credit or authority with his relations, his neighbours, or companions; and might prevail by example, by admonition, by intreaty, or expostulation, to do good upon them? The nobility, gentry, and large traders have an influence almost irresistible upon their tenants, dependants, and numerous households. And as forward as these are to imitate their superiors in folly and vanity, they would think it a much more solid happiness to follow them to the public worship of God; to attend them in family-devotions and instruc-

tions; or to serve under them in works of charity, or public improvements. For as much as human nature is corrupted, still vice and immorality are self-condemned, and under the perpetual lashes both of judgment and conscience. Men commonly loath the vicious courses they are pursuing, and are dragged into wickedness by custom, or company, *as an ox to the slaughter, or a fool to the correction of the stocks.* How many thousands are there who would be good if they dared; and who would rejoice in their hearts to leave their abominations, and to become sober, thrifty, and religious, had they but the happiness of neighbours, masters, or friends, to set them the amiable example, and to keep them in countenance?

Wherefore, my brethren, instead of looking upon the blessed work of reformation as a thing desperate and impracticable, let every one of us set about it immediately, as his particular duty, and his particular interest. For we shall find it of absolute and indispensable necessity, in whatsoever character or light we turn ourselves to view and examine it.

If we would shew our loyalty to that best of princes, under whose just, gentle, and steady administration these kingdoms have been so long, and so auspiciously governed, let us remember, that his title, his honour and security must be established in righteousness; and that the best christians always make the best subjects. If you consider yourselves as parents, manifest a rational fondness of your posterity, by training them up in the principles, which will lead them to substantial happiness; well assured as
you

you are, that the grace of God is the truest riches; that virtue is a jewel solid and unperishable, and the best inheritance which you can entail upon them. If the land of our nativity, the memory of our forefathers, the laws and constitutions of our country so long enjoyed, and so justly boasted of, have any weight and influence upon our hearts; let not all these turn to our reproach, by basely perishing in our hands; let them not be intercepted from our innocent children by our profaneness and impiety, our luxury and effeminacy.

In a word, let me beseech you by the mercies of God; by all the revolutions and wonderful deliverances which he has so often worked for us; by every thing which can be dear and truly valuable in the sight of Englishmen, christians, or reasonable beings, that you instantly awake, and behold your danger; that you look well before you, and discern the things that belong unto your peace; that you repent immediately, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, that so iniquity may not be your ruin.

F I N I S.

